

Aca Joe Cool

A "minimalist tech" philosophy drives Aca Joe Mexico to the height of cool.

By Caryn Manson

Simplicity is not a virtue if it is not elaborate within. So says Gerald Jacobs, president of Jacobs Design Inc., the Tiburon, Calif.-based architect and designer behind the tremendously popular Aca Joe Mexico stores. While the international Aca Joe company filed for Chapter 11 protection in 1987, Aca Joe Mexico, originator of the Aca Joe line and chain of stores, remained independent since its inception in the early 1970s, and continues today as a profitable and growing venture.

Jacobs' design for Aca Joe/Coyoacan, one of Aca Joe Mexico's latest stores, is truly simplicity at its best — exemplifying what Jacobs has come to call "minimalist tech" and providing a perfect showcase for the Aca Joe line.

Designed for men, Aca Joe fashions are active and contemporary, with women now buying in equal numbers. Styles are bright and colorful, with a casual urban flair, and appeal to all ages. Merchandise lines are exclusive to the store, designed by owner Joe Rank, and include sweaters, trousers and shorts, shirts and jackets. The garments are simple and clean, says Jacobs, offering somewhat limited variety, but featuring a lot of color — up to eight different selections per line.

At the Coyoacan store, completed in



Photography by Jorge Pablo de Aguinaco

December 1989, Joe's colorful merchandise is at center stage. Set in Mexico City's highest-end mall, Aca Joe/Coyoacan is sleek, European and high tech, catering to an upscale clientele while attracting customers of all kinds from Mexico City's large and diverse population.

Jacobs' design for Aca Joe/Coyoacan evolved from a prototype he designed in 1980 after a casual introduction to Joe Rank at a party. Rank had eight stores open already, and was looking for fresh, new ideas. Jacobs, having never designed a retail store, brought to the table a high-tech and simplistic approach — apparently just what Rank was hankering for. Since that chance meeting, Jacobs has designed more than 200 stores, with features constantly changing and maturing with each new appli-

cation.

Central to the design of all stores were five key concepts, fine-tuned with each application. Jacobs' design matrix is neutral. Active. New. Attractive. Functional. The store captures attention with colorful merchandise uniquely displayed. Aca Joe is easy for the customer to understand and the owner to operate.

And, at the heart of it all — simplicity and neutrality. "The goal was to create something completely neutral and simple that would not compete with the products. This required total ego elimination, rather difficult for a young architect full of it," remarks Jacobs.

In his design quest, the architect was aided by his own easygoing nature and inspired by the many galleries and museums he had visited. "I am an art lover



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Wall fixtures and islands fill the space, again in neutral colors that allow the colors of the product to "pop out" against a clean background.

Gray wire baskets form wall units, or are arranged as tables, or benches, for stacks of colorful merchandise. Rods hang from the walls, shaped like ship ladders in stainless steel. The checkout counter, a clean white sporting the Aca logo, is a contrasting centerpiece — front and center of the entrance doors.

A perfect grid of lights, high-tech and industrial with 10 watts per square foot, directs the eye to the merchandise and warms the floor and walls with soft reflections.

As Aca Joe/Coyoacan physically tests, designing simplicity is a far cry from simply designing. Elements flow together, carefully planned and tested over time, to create a timeless appeal. □
Caryn Manson is president of a real estate marketing and public relations firm in Atlanta.

and realize that displays work best when kept simple and neutral," he explains.

Ceilings of soaring height, 14 feet at Coyoacan, add elegance to simplicity, with lighting of an industrial appeal highlighting the merchandise. Symmetry — placing the door and counter centrally — balances the proportion and adds a classic, timeless quality.

Storefronts are transparent, eliminating entrance boundaries and providing a clear view of the product. "Essentially, you're inside before you even get there," says Jacobs. Sheer, structural glass is seamless, a clear and transparent medium with the strength to withstand gale-force winds.

The system is structural one-half-inch tempered glass, modulated for proportion and garment display — as tall and wide as possible. Window displays float on air, with three-fourths-inch glass fins. The awning, a fabric-wrapped acrylic box, is also suspended in glass, and at Coyoacan is bowed slightly, still perpendicular to the floor, but softer and updated.

A light oak longstrip floor forms the base of the store, active and neutrally warm. Walls are a painted brick veneer — gray — as in an old warehouse. Smooth drywall forms the ceiling, compensating for the texture of the brick.

Elements float, with rounded columns detached from the walls, and ceilings as high as ideally possible. The layout is open and uncomplicated, with a fitting room core made of standard toilet partitions positioned in a back corner.

"The ceiling is lower above the core, for a sense of warmth when undressing. A curved soffit above is reminiscent of boats docking the resorts," describes Jacobs. Two portholes add to the effect, which is kept carefree and easy as customers' heads peek above the doors, and clothes lie freely on the floor.

At Coyoacan, a loft sits atop the dressing room, perfect for an office.

Curves are a recurring element — appearing in the soffit, the columns, the mirror wall cap, the freestanding counter — and a trademark of Jacobs' design.

THE PLAYERS

CLIENT

Joseph S. Rank, owner of all rights to stores in Mexico, as well as licensor, manufacturer and designer of the product. The Coyoacan store is a licensed unit owned by Azpiazu Hermanos, S.A.

Architect

Gerald N. Jacobs, Jacobs Design Inc.

In-House Construction

Arq. Jorge Olivares, Aca Joe Mexico

Consultants

Graphic Design: Joe Vera, Vera Design

Store Design: Jacobs Design Inc.; Arq. Luis Romero

Suppliers

Glass Storefronts: Ignacio Moro, Vidrios y Aluminio Bizarro

Awnings: Eclipse

Neoparies (Neutral Glass Piers): N.E.G. America

Check-out Counter: Bernardo Bravo Cabinetmakers

Stainless Steel Rods: Alfredo Salazer and Co.